

## 3.2 The Communication Link

One of the most successful indicators of any organization is how well information is shared. This is one of the most critical functions that volunteers and leaders at a MEPS will be challenged to provide: insuring families and command stay informed.

### **Making First Contact**

MEPS often introduce the RSG to newly assigned personnel and families by sending them letters of welcome. Each MEPS may already have a template for the letter in place. The following is an example of the text to include in the letter; it should be personalized to fit the needs of the RSG and command.

*Hello,*

*I just wanted to write a few lines to welcome you to our MEPS. We all hope your stay here will be one of the best experiences of your military career. We have a very active readiness support group. I'm happy to say that I have been appointed as your MEPS Volunteer. If you haven't been involved in a readiness support program before, it is a great way to stay informed about what's going on in the MEPS and what's happening in the local area.*

*I would like to give you a call sometime after you are settled to say hello and see if I can help in any way. I realize that the first few days are hectic. If you need anything or would just like to call someone who's been here a while to ask some questions, my phone number is:\_\_\_\_\_.*

*If you don't hear from me within 2 weeks, please give me a call. I probably have an incorrect telephone number for you and can't reach you. I really look forward to meeting you and welcoming you I person.*

*Sincerely,*

Generally, a point of contact (POC) will follow up on the initial letter of welcome by making a phone call. Here are some tips for making this call:

- Make the first contact call when you are feeling enthusiastic and upbeat.
- Do not take it personally if someone isn't interested in the RSG or has had a bad experience with another program. Assure the person that he or she is welcome as part of the unit any time.
- You may have to contact people without phones by letter.
- Email is also an option for following up after the initial contact.

### **Suggestions for First Contact**

- ☐ State your name and position
- ☐ Explain what the RSG is and tasks you do
- ☐ Provide personal information about how long you've been in the area
- ☐ Ask if the address you have is correct
- ☐ Fill out a Contact Sheet if possible
- ☐ Relate any news or invite them to any upcoming events
- ☐ Ensure they have your phone number and/or email address
- ☐ Ask if you can assist them by offering resource information and referrals
- ☐ Ask them if they mind if you call again and when it would be convenient (or if email is more convenient)

\*\* Please follow the MEPCOM guidance established for completion of the Contact Sheet, maintaining confidentiality, and file management.

### **Responding to Calls**

There are four types of routine calls:

1. Information
2. Complaint or grievance
3. Recurring
4. Service demands



**Information Calls** - Information Calls are the most common type of routine call. Callers will usually have questions about the types of services available, the hours of operation, etc. For example, a spouse may call with a question about obtaining child care.

**Complaint/Grievance Calls** – In this type of call, someone generally complains about a service. People may call the POC because they've already tried normal channels to solve a problem, with no success. If a POC believes the person's complaint is valid, he or she can work through the chain of command with that person to resolve the problem.

**Recurring Calls** – Sometimes people will call repeatedly because they are lonely or have something they want to complain about. One example of a recurring call could be a caller with a family problem that he or she cannot or will not resolve. Another example is a caller who misses living near a large military facility. The POC may have to be firm when handling these calls. One way to do this is to inform the caller that there is a routine time limit to phone calls. If the problem seems to be loneliness, another option is to establish a "phone buddy" to call this person. There may be someone at the MEPS or a family member who would be interested in helping.

**Service Demand Calls** – Sometimes a person will call to say, "I need a babysitter today" or "I need a ride to the doctor's office." Although emergencies do happen, these are generally not the kind of services the volunteer should provide personally. It is helpful to have lists of agencies that assist in emergency situations handy, such as local child care resource and referral offices, or local bus schedules.

Whatever the type of call, it is important for the POC to understand why the person is calling and what kind of referral is needed.

### **Steps in Handling Routine Calls**

1. Greeting
2. Record keeping
3. Business of the call
4. Closing
5. Follow up as needed



**Greeting** – The POC should remove as many distractions as possible, so that when a call comes in, he or she can really listen to what the person is saying. The first step is to greet the person in an upbeat, positive way.

**Record Keeping** – In the second step, the POC must get some identification from the caller, both for documenting the call was received and to determine the caller's eligibility for services. Ask for the caller's name and service member's name (if applicable). Check it against the contact roster received from the MEPS.

**Business of the Call** – In the third step, the POC needs to:

1. Identify the need or the problem. Use a phrase like "How can I assist you?" or "What can I do for you today?" to lead the caller into discussing the reason for the call. Good listening skills are critical to finding out why they are calling.
2. Take action. Once you understand the situation, take action by making the referral to the most appropriate resource. Don't confuse someone by referring him or her to several places in one call. Make sure the caller has the information written down and then provide an overview of how that agency or service can assist. There will be occasions when you will need to research the situation and then call back. Be sure you inform the caller how much time you think it will take to find the information. It is critical to this process that you fulfill your promise to call. If you need more time to research, then call anyway and explain the situation and schedule a later date to call again.
3. Develop an action plan with the caller. An action plan lets the caller know what to do next and what to expect. Here are some questions you will need to answer for the caller:
  - a. Who will make the contact with the agency or service?
  - b. When will the contact be made?
  - c. What will be asked for?
  - d. Who will go to the agency or service?
  - e. Who is the point of contact at the agency?
  - f. How will the individual travel to the agency or service?

<b>IMPORTANT:</b> If you don't know the correct answer to a question, say so. Don't guess!
--

**Closing** – After the business of the call, the fourth step in handling routine calls is to close the call. If the call was fairly simple, you may say, "Call me if you need anything else." If the call was complex, be sure to summarize what was discussed. Make sure the caller knows what to do next. If you need to follow up, let the caller know when to expect your call.

**Follow Up As Needed-** The POC may want to follow up in a few days to see if the caller was able to get the service or if another referral is needed.

### **Disseminating Information to Families**

There are a number of ways in which the RSG can disseminate information.

**Phone Tree** – A phone tree can be used for unit information only. The MEPS Commander decides when to use the phone tree and notifies the RSG Volunteer Coordinator, who informs the volunteers and/or POCs.

**Emails** – Emails are a good option to provide “supplemental” information to personnel and families. The benefit of emails is that they provide instant updates and announcements. The main drawback is that there is no guarantee people received the emails, or that everyone has access to emails. Another drawback is that “sensitive” information can then be shared with other people.

**Newsletters** – Another successful option is to create a newsletter. This allows for a variety of information to be provided to everyone in a relatively consistent forum. Several things should be considered when developing newsletters:

- Who is your target audience?
- What information needs to be shared?
- How will the newsletters be delivered (hard copies in the office, mailed, electronic versions)?
- What is the frequency of publishing this newsletter?

**Group Functions** – Take advantage of any group functions to make announcements about MEPS or RSG activities.

### **Sending Official Messages**

There will be occasions when POCs will pass along official messages from the Commander, such as when the phone tree is activated. POCs must **always** write down the message **verbatim** and repeat it exactly the same way to every person on the calling list. It is important to repeat the message verbatim because the original message becomes more distorted and less clear with each additional comment. Remember that appointed RSG volunteers and/or POCs represent the command and every additional comment becomes part of the “official” message. Here are some additional tips:

- Do not speculate about the content of the message
- Do not add perspective, opinions, or information from another source
- Ask people to defer any questions until you have made all the calls. Offer to call back later.

### **Dealing With Rumors**

When rumors arise, follow these strategies to combat them:

- Correct the information if you can
- Urge people to question the reliability of “unofficial information”
- Tell people not to pass rumors. Pass official information only.
- Contact the RSG Volunteer Coordinator or command for help in dispelling rumors.

**Dealing With Media**

The media may approach personnel, family members or volunteers whenever there is a military related crisis situation. Follow these tips for handling media inquiries:



- Refer the media representative to the MEPS Commander or to the Public Affairs Office (PAO) at HQ USMEPCOM.
- If someone persists, get his or her name, organization and any questions. Forward this information to the Commander or to PAO.
- Notify the Commander of the attempted media contact.

**Communication Link Exercise**

How would you handle these situations?

**Situation 1** - You are the POC in charge of providing RSG information to newcomers and their families. You work at the MEPS too, so you see the sponsor in the building everyday. You have tried several times to speak to the sponsor, but he or she tells you to “call the spouse”. Of course you’ve tried to do that, but only get messages on their answering machine. The Commander has made this a priority for this MEPS and you are getting frustrated. *What are your options? How would you handle it differently the next time?*

**Situation 2** – The service member is on TDY or a short-term deployment. On a Sunday night you receive a phone call from the spouse asking for your help because the basement is flooding. You live at least an hour away from this family. *How would you handle this situation?*

**Situation 3** – You have started hearing rumors about the MEPS moving to a new location. One person has heard that the MEPS is going to move to the military installation located 60 miles away. Another person has heard that MEPS isn’t moving, but there are going to be “reductions” in the number of positions. *What would you say to these people? What else could be done to control the rumors?*